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Introduction - "Religion and Science" Special Issue

Citation for published version:

Harris, M 2015, 'Introduction - "Religion and Science" Special Issue', *Expository Times*, vol. 127, no. 1, pp. 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524615599097>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524615599097](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524615599097)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Expository Times

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INTRODUCTION

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The relationship between science and faith is a defining feature of the modern religious landscape, not least because of the widespread perception that science and religion are irreconcilably at odds with each other, with the success of the natural sciences being widely cited as a primary reason for religious disbelief. Over the past few decades a flourishing academic discipline ('science and religion', or 'theology and science') has grown up to address this issue, and while a proportion of the work takes an apologetic tone (often seeking to demonstrate that there are other, more constructive modes of relating between the two than one of conflict), there has also been a great deal of enthusiasm for investigating both the challenges and opportunities that the natural sciences present to theology. It was in the spirit of fostering this enthusiasm more widely that in 2012 the John Templeton Foundation awarded a grant to the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh to set up a masters programme in Science and Religion. The Expository Times invited me to edit a special issue of the journal, with a view to showcasing science and religion as a research discipline. Consequently, I commissioned three UK-based scholars who work in the science and religion field, to write articles exploring a prominent theme in current debate. It did not require much pondering to hit on the right theme.

'Human uniqueness' has become the touchstone for a wide spectrum of discussions currently taking place in the natural and social sciences, and in theology. Despite the great Darwin debates of the nineteenth century, which established the point that humans are as much a product of evolutionary processes as any other animal (and that humans are therefore different in degree not kind from other animals), and despite a great deal more evidence coming to light in the intervening 150 years essentially confirming this point, the contrasting belief that humans are uniquely 'special' amongst all life has proved to be remarkably durable as a cultural and theological meme. Perhaps the most enduring bastion of human uniqueness is the theological world, where much is invested in the belief that God created humans specially and alone 'in the image of God'.

Attempts to assert human uniqueness are often made in pseudo-evolutionary terms. So it might be claimed that humans are the pinnacle of evolution, or that humans have managed to extricate themselves from the evolutionary struggle: our technological prowess has enabled us to raise ourselves above the survival of the fittest; we are, quite simply, the fittest. A related viewpoint – the one most often relied upon in theological defences of human uniqueness – is that humans are the inevitable outcome of the evolutionary process. But whether science can support any of these expressions of 'human uniqueness' is another matter. On the one hand, all species are unique in a trivial sense. But on the other, we humans like to believe that we are 'uniquely unique'.

Many factors must be taken into account in assessing this debate, not least signs that humans are still evolving, being only a very recent addition to life on earth. In other words, the future is totally uncertain. Moreover, research into human origins has revealed more and more continuities with our ancestors, and our biological cousins, the other modern apes. The realisation that the majority of modern humans contain Neanderthal genes indicates that there was inter-breeding in our (relatively) recent past, and that any special privileges we grant to

humans might also need to be extended to our relations too. And the search for extra-terrestrial intelligent life raises related questions about the degree to which those qualities we value in humankind are so unique when seen against unknown life beyond this planet. Even theology itself can raise challenges to human uniqueness. For many Christians 'human uniqueness' finds its justification in the core doctrine that God became human in Christ. The worry is that if humans are not the pinnacle of life in the universe it would be seen to undermine the incarnation. But others maintain that a firm belief in the incarnation provides a reason to believe in 'human un-uniqueness', since biblical and patristic resources exist to indicate that the incarnation should not be seen as God-becoming-a-human so much as the Creator-becoming-a-creature.

The three authors in this volume provide further perspectives, each very different from the other.

Michael Burdett defends human uniqueness as a key component of the doctrine of the image of God. By investigating the varying extents to which its four main interpretations rely on human uniqueness, and then examining the challenges from evolutionary biology, and from information science and technology, Burdett points out that every interpretation of the image of God retains a degree of theological robustness, and a degree to which humans might be said to be unique.

Andrew Davison points out that, although defences of human uniqueness often tacitly make the case for human *superiority*, 'unique' can also mean 'distinct'. Calling upon Aquinas, exobiology (the modern search for life beyond earth, which may be superior to us in various ways), and convergent evolution (the realisation that evolution often hits upon similar solutions in different contexts), Davison emphasises the importance of remembering human *continuities* with other life, and that human uniqueness is best retained in the sense of 'unique-as-distinctive'.

Bethany Sollereeder takes the discussion elsewhere, into issues central to the Christian narrative of atonement, especially suffering and salvation. Proponents of human uniqueness have often assumed that only humans truly suffer, which has gone hand-in-hand with an anthropocentric view of redemption. Taking animal suffering seriously, Sollereeder emphasises the commonalities between humans and other animals, and consequently proposes a more holistic soteriology than has traditionally been the case. Nevertheless, she still finds a place for human uniqueness, understood in terms of the *role* of humans in creation rather than any superior innate *capacity*.

The three authors were left entirely to their own devices as to whether they should defend or attack human uniqueness. It is gratifying – and demonstrates the strengths of the contemporary science and religion dialogue – that all three chose neither to attack nor defend but to re-build, with science and theology as equal partners.